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“THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN SUFFERETH VIOLENCE”

AN EXPOSITION OF MATT. 11:12, 13

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And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

This has always been recognized as one of the most difficult of our Lord's sayings and not a few commentators have confessed themselves utterly baffled by it. Of late years, however, the question as to its true meaning has become peculiarly urgent. What was formerly an obscure text, interesting chiefly as a riddle of exegesis, is now perceived to have an intimate bearing on one of the central problems of New Testament theology. In all the more recent literature on our Lord's conception of the kingdom of God, this passage is singled out as one of crucial importance. Until we can interpret it, several of the main issues in the larger problem will remain uncertain.

There can be little doubt that Matthew has preserved the saying in a more authentic form than Luke. In the Lucan parallel (16:16) the vivid and characteristic image disappears, and is replaced by a matter-of-fact statement. Luke, it is evident, was perplexed by the saying as all interpreters have been since, and gave a paraphrase of what he conceived to be its meaning. This fact in itself is valuable as an incidental proof of the genuineness of the saying. To the second generation it had already become unintelligible and could never have found its way into the gospels unless it had formed part of the very earliest tradition. Before attempting an explanation of the passage we require to take account of several preliminary difficulties.

1. The word *βιάζetai* may be translated with equal correctness in a neutral or a passive sense (“breaks in” or “is forced”). The former rendering would undoubtedly simplify the thought, and has commended itself to many scholars; but, in view of the clause that follows, it is inadmissible. A parallelism is obviously intended and is destroyed unless we translate as in our English version. The

shade of meaning in ἀπράζουσι has likewise to be noted. The word does not denote "force an entrance" (as into a besieged city), but "seize hold of," "carry off as plunder." It suggests the picture of a prize just coming within reach, which the bolder spirits immediately capture, without waiting for a signal.

2. The saying which appears in Matthew as part of a long passage is isolated by Luke. He reserves it for a later place in his gospel (16:16), although otherwise he gives the discourse on John the Baptist in much the same form as Matthew (Matt. 11:7-11 = Luke 6:24-28). It may be inferred that Matthew in his usual manner has grouped together several kindred sayings while Luke keeps them separate, as he found them in his source. We are thus relieved of the difficulty of tracing a connection between our saying and the passage as a whole. The introductory words, "and from the days of John the Baptist until now," may also cease to trouble us. Certainly as they stand they suggest a late date, when John had become a figure of the past; but we may regard them as merely the connecting link, supplied by the evangelist himself.

3. Luke varies from Matthew in the order which he assigns to the two parts of the saying, "the law and the prophets were until John, but now," etc. The larger mass of critical opinion would here give the preference to Matthew; but we incline to a different view. Matthew is anxious to bring the Logion into a given setting—to connect it, on the one hand, with the preceding discourse and, on the other hand, with the closing statement, "This is Elias" (11:14). Luke has no such motive for inverting the order of the sentences. We therefore conclude that the original saying ran thus: "The law and the prophets were until John; since then the kingdom of God is taken forcibly, and the violent drag it toward them." John, that is to say, had inaugurated a new era. In former times the kingdom had been merely foreseen and hoped for; now it had come so near that men could hasten their possession of it, by an effort of their own.

According to the view which has recently been advocated by many scholars (most notably by Johannes Weiss), our Lord could never have intended his words to bear this meaning. He thought of the kingdom as of something which would come in its own time, by the immediate act of God. The idea that men could in any sense compel the

kingdom was wholly foreign to his mind, and would have seemed to him nothing less than blasphemous. Weiss maintains, therefore, that the words must have been spoken in indignant irony. The agitation which was finally to culminate in the great revolt had received a new impulse from the preaching of the Baptist, and Jesus warned the people against vain and unholy attempts to enforce the kingdom of God. It would not come by compulsion; not the violent, but those who waited patiently for God, would possess it in the appointed time. To this interpretation, however, there are several objections which at once suggest themselves: (1) No indication is given us that the saying was spoken in irony or by way of rebuke; (2) The agitation had begun long before John's appearance, and he did nothing, so far as we can gather, to increase it; (3) Our Lord's uniform attitude to John was one of respect and admiration, and we cannot believe that he charged his predecessor with initiating a mistaken movement. But there is another and more radical objection, the consideration of which may help us toward a right understanding of the passage.

Granting that Jesus conceived of the kingdom in an apocalyptic sense, must we assume that he discountenanced all human efforts to hasten it? The Jewish apocalyptic writings themselves allow for a certain co-operation of man with God. A time is fixed for the commencement of the new age, but Israel may "shorten the days" by prayer, repentance, stricter obedience to the law. It seems to us that this idea of a compulsion which man may exercise in the divine purpose is not only accepted by Jesus but occupies an essential place in his teaching. So, far from commending the attitude of passive waiting, he desires that men should prevail on God and overcome his seeming reluctance. In this manner we would explain the passages in which Jesus bestows emphatic praise on those who force themselves on his help by some kind of aggressive action. He recognizes in them the spirit by which all divine benefits are to be obtained. The paralytic at Capernaum, the Syrophenician woman, Zacchaeus, the blind man by the wayside, did not wait passively till Jesus should remember them, but obtruded themselves upon him and sought to enforce his will. He loved to have it so. He welcomed in them the religious temper which he wished to awaken in all men by his preaching of the kingdom. The same idea appears to be expressed even

more directly in such parables as those of the Importunate Widow and the Traveler at Midnight. It is reasonable to conjecture that these parables were spoken, not of prayer in general, but of specific prayer for the hastening of the kingdom (cf. Luke 18:7, 8). By crying unto God night and day, by knocking at the door even though it seemed barred against them, men had it in their own power to shorten the interval of waiting. The petition, "Thy kingdom come," is to the same effect. It implies a conviction that the appointed time might be brought nearer by the unwearied prayer of God's people.

This aspect of our Lord's teaching has been too much neglected in recent speculations on his conception of the kingdom. If we regard him merely as waiting for a kingdom which was to come catastrophically at a set time, it is hard to see how his work differed, in any respect, from that of John. It is still harder to see how it possessed any original religious value. We begin to discern its true significance only when we discover that Jesus set himself to realize, as well as to foretell, the kingdom. Acknowledging though he did that it would come about mysteriously and suddenly by the will of God, he believed that men could in some sense compel the divine will. He saw in faith a power which would remove mountains, which would prevail with God himself; and his aim was to arouse the people to a supreme effort of faith. They were not merely to wait for the kingdom, but to hasten its coming by their own endeavor. It was thus Jesus himself who prescribed the great ideal which the Christian church has kept before it ever since, that of working along with God for the fulfilment of his kingdom.

We conclude, then, that the passage under discussion simply expresses with peculiar force and vividness one of the essential and pervading thoughts in the teaching of Jesus. He believed that the purpose of God could be hastened. He sought to inspire in men the compelling faith which would hasten it. The law and the prophets had been until John, but the period of mere waiting for the kingdom was now to cease. The appointed time was so near that a strong faith could break down the remaining barriers. "Violent men," whose hearts were set on the kingdom, might now leap forward and take it by force, even before the time.